



## Journal of Emerging Trends in Social Sciences and Humanities

A Double-Blind, Peer-Reviewed, HEC recognized [Y-category](#) Research Journal

E-ISSN: [3006-7898](#) P-ISSN: [3006-788X](#)

Volume 3 Issue 4, 2026, 208-215



### China-India Competition In South Asia: Implication for Regional Security

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#### Article Information

##### Received:

2026-08-17

##### Revised:

2026-09-21

##### Accepted:

2026-10-18

#### ABSTRACT

The competition between China and India, has been a great influence on the political, economic, and security landscape of South Asia. The article highlights the key factors that led to their rivalry such as geostrategic, economic and connectivity programmes, and military rivalry. It also examines the implications on the stability of the region, particularly in the political tensions, security concerns and economic decision-making it also effects the smaller South Asian states. The method of the study is qualitative and the data used are secondary data taken from academic books, journal articles, policy reports and official documents. The authors point out the need for increased regional talk, confidence building, and cooperation as a way of easing tensions and furthering longer term peace and stability in South Asia. The strategic competition between China and India has increased intra-regional competition and made foreign relations between states more complex and intense.

#### Keywords

China; India; South Asia;  
Strategic Competition;  
Regional Stability;  
Geopolitics; Security.



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Publisher: Institute for Educating Environmental Resilience and Governance

## Introduction

Geopolitical sphere is related to China and India, which are two emerging countries in the world, whose influence in the region is expanding at a day-to-day level. The increasingly prevalent and ambitious foreign policy initiated by China in 2013 under Xi Jinping's leadership has contributed to increasing strategic rivalry with India in South Asia and spread its impact on South Asian region. South Asia, a geopolitically contested region shared by almost one quarter of the world's population, is characterized by complex political dynamics, widespread rivalries and ongoing security issues. It has major strategic importance due to its geographical location, natural reserves. Historical interaction between these states has occurred in many forms such as those of the cross-cultural interaction and historical trade routes. The policy under the leadership of Xi Jinping actively invested China in connectivity and infrastructure works in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Pakistan as a part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), an attempt to extend its influence in south of Asia.

The growing economic and strategic presence of China in South Asia such as the BRI represents a shift in regional power dynamics. The impact of the international system on state behavior whereby rising powers are inherently interested in increasing their presence. India in response takes this expansion as a threat and reinforced its involvement in the region and military capacity which depicts the realist theory of security dilemma. The rivalry is more comprehensible in terms of Offensive Realism especially as explained by John Mearsheimer who asserts that great powers are naturally motivated to increase their relative power and establish a regional hegemony.

The strengthening of Chinese relations with Pakistan, more investments in Sri Lanka, Nepal and Bangladesh show that the country is trying to increase its strategic space and surround India. To counter the threats India tries to offset China by modernizing militarily and establishing infrastructures along the borders and internationally through the formation of alliances with other states. Simultaneously, components of defensive realism imply that states are not always interested in acquiring maximum power but still

enjoy an adequate power to guarantee security. This is seen in the reserved nature of India that does not confront China but continues to fight back its influence to ensure that there is a balance in the region.

South Asia and the Indian Ocean are becoming major arenas of great-power competition, particularly between China and India, while the broader U.S.–China rivalry also affects the region. China's growing economic, political, and strategic presence across South Asia and the Indian Ocean is influencing the regional balance of power. The competition between China and India could weigh into whether regional states are more likely to join together or to fight amongst themselves, to forge strategic alliances, or to join into separate international coalitions. The strategic and economic stakes in the region are also present with other powers, such as the United States, Japan, Russia, and the European Union. Meanwhile, smaller South Asian nations want to retain their strategic independence by taking advantage of the competition between the big powers without facing its repercussions. These conflicts extend beyond the South Asian region and its stability and security and have implications for the Indo Pacific region and the global balance of power (Madan, 2021).

The implications of regional security realism include that military buildup and rivalry in armaments an increased risk of conflict or the escalation of a crisis, less cooperation among the region states because of their conflicting national interests. South Asia emerges as an arena of great power rivalry. Realism offers a solid theoretical context to explain the strategic competition between China and India in South Asia, especially in Xi era (Muzaffar and Khan, 2021). Based on the premises of the International Relations theory, realism explains that the international system is anarchic or in other words there is no central authority to the states and thus, every state needs to take care of its survival by itself. In this regard, China and India are rational actors that are interested in maximizing their power and securing their national interests.

At the sub-regional and regional level, the two states are struggling to have a say in South Asia and the Indo-Pacific and frequently do so by

involving smaller states in economic investments, connectivity initiatives, and strategic alliances. At the cross-continental level, actions such as the Belt and Road projects of China and outreach of India to Africa and Southeast Asia show the overlap of spheres of influence. Their engagement in multilateral forums or meetings such as BRICS (Brazil Russia India China South Africa) and BASIC (Brazil South Africa India China) shows a selective pattern of cooperation globally especially on matters such as global governance reform and climate change. India-China relations are placed in a more comprehensive and dynamic global framework. They do not only react to the current order of the world, but they also construct it. Their interaction is based on the logic of multipolarity, according to which states must compete and cooperate at the same time depending on the area of issues. The nature of this relationship is transitional and thus its future course is not clear.

The slow process of India being incorporated into the global economic and financial systems. In combination with the established global power of China is shaping a dynamic of balancing politics. India wants to increase its strategic independence and reduce the dominance of China in the region whereas China wants to stabilize itself without causing a direct confrontation. This fine line of balance indicates that the relationship would not go to the extreme of conflict or a stable partner but would be in the managed competition state (Panda, 2017). The essence of the problem is that the Indian Chinese relations is in their complexity. Their relationships at various levels such as bilateral to global relationships form them one of the most compound and consequential relations in the present-day international politics that constantly shaped by the ever-changing multipolar world order.

### **Literature Review**

In this article, "Impact of China's Belt and Road Initiative on regional stability in South Asia", by Zahid Shahab ahmad discuss the effects of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) on the stability of the South Asian region by focusing on the domestic and geopolitical factors. It critically examines China's investments in Bangladesh, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka to understand how that impacts local economies and

politics as well as the geopolitical climate considering the rivalry between China and India. The geostrategic competition between China and India seems to be having a negative effect on South Asian regionalism as China works to find alternatives to India and Indian-dominated institutions to lessen India's dominance. China's economic influence is not uniform and the Sri Lanka and Pakistan case studies show that Beijing is able to comprehensively manage the deep seaports it has constructed under BRI. It is not Beijing's intention to intervene in domestic politics in the selected countries, although it has interacted with various political actors in those countries. The current literature primarily addresses investments in the BRI or rivals between China and India, but they have not been studied together and in comparison to their effects on regional stability in South Asia. This study addresses this gap by analyzing the regional security and cooperation implications of the dynamics between China and India and how smaller South Asian states react to the competition and respond to it (Ahmad, 2021).

In this article, "India and China's rivalry is reshaping South Asia" by Donnellon-May, South Asia has been the key area in the increasingly significant conflict between China and India. China is actively expanding its power with the help of such programs as the Belt and Road Initiative or its presence in oceans spending 150 billion dollars in countries like Pakistan, Nepal or Sri Lanka. India in response is implementing policies including neighbor first which will facilitate the tightening of bonds in the region. The other area of concern in the article is the growth of the String of Pearls policy of China and the growing working of the debt diplomacy where the author says that the rising tension in the region is weakening the soft power of India. Although the article has a good coverage of the external strategy it covers the internal politics of the small South Asian countries very little. Although it succeeds in outlining the strategic and economic competition between China and India in South Asia, the article fails to offer sufficient details of how smaller countries of South Asia find their way in this competition internally. It does not consider the impacts of domestic political, economic and institutional conditions on such reactions of these countries or the way in which they can self-plan

depending on their relationships with the two giant powers (Donnellon-May, 2023).

In this report, “The China-India Relationship: Between Cooperation and Competition” by Clara Fong, targeted China and India are two economic and demographic powerhouses, the bilateral relationship of which is filled with high interdependence and long-term competition. Their borders, once a key trade and international collaboration area, remain a point of tension, with ambiguous boundaries and disputes over territories e.g. Aksai Chin, Arunachal Pradesh and frequent military confrontations still contributing to the lack of trust in each other. The China projections work by means of infrastructure funding and strategic alliances, especially those in the Global South, whereas India focuses on diplomacy, normative leadership, and strategic independence to counteract the China model. The U.S. considers India to be a counterbalance to China but the nonalignment policy of India and trading hostility with the U.S. makes the alignment difficult. New deals to calm tensions in the border are considered tactical rather than a permanent solution. Although Fong gives a fair account of the relations between China and India that is characterized by both cooperation and competition, the work mostly focuses on the tension between the two countries and their diplomatic relationships without in-depth consideration of their overall effect on the security of the South Asian region. It is also unclear how continuing border conflicts, strategic rivalry and external alignments under Xi Jinping affect the regional balance of power and security structure in South Asia. This study seeks to address that gap by looking at the China-India strategic rivalry of the Xi era and how that has led to a change in the stability and security dynamics of the region (Fong, 2025).

In this book “The Sino-Indian Rivalry: Implications for Global Order” by Sumit Ganguly, Manjeet S. Pardesi, and William R. Thompson explores how China and India have a long-standing strategic rivalry that was rooted in the late 1940s and continues presently. The authors believe that this competition is not only spatial, as it entails border and territorial conflicts, but also positional, which is centered on leadership and influence in Asia. With a focus on power asymmetries in favor of China, the book

reveals how the attempts of India to balance it by forming alliances with it particularly that of the United States have heightened tensions. It goes further to seek the connection of the rivalry to the China-Pakistan and India-Pakistan dispute, further developing a complicated, so-called triadic relationship that can have international consequences. There exists an obvious gap in investigating the direct impact of the current strategic race between China and India on the regional relations of power, security issues and stability in South Asia. This paper seeks to fill this gap by investigating the implication of the Xi-era China India rivalry on South Asian regional security and the changing power balance (Ganguly, Sumit, Kapur & Paul, 2019).

The paper “Impact Assessment of China-India Strategic Competition on Security Dynamics of South Asia” by Saira Rehman considers the ways in which the increasing competition between China and India is transforming South Asia, politically and in security terms. The upheaval of competitive influence by China through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and India through its policy of establishing regional supremacy through its policies of Neighborhood First and Act East has heightened competition. The South Asian smaller states like Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka and the Maldives are strategizing in a way that they would attain economic and political benefits without being fully aligned to either power. The paper has concluded that long-term cooperation, mutual respect and cautious diplomacy between all actors in the region are the key to ensuring peace and stability in South Asia as the Sino-Indian competition is likely to increase. In this paper, the author is studying how China-India strategic competition affects the security dynamics in South Asia, the paper mostly gives a descriptive analysis of what the idea of soft balancing and hedging includes, but this research does not critically analyze how the policies of Xi Jinping and the assertive Chinese strategies are restructuring the balance of power and security in this region. The Xi era Sino-Indian rivalry has left a knowledge gap concerning the long-term effects on South Asian stability, threat perceptions, and alignments in the strategies. This paper is designed to fill this gap by connecting China competition with India under Xi Jinping with the context of changing regional security issues and

South Asian balance of power (Rehman S. , 2024).

### **Research Methodology**

This research adopts a qualitative, exploratory and descriptive analytical approach. A qualitative approach is employed since the subject matter, namely great power rivalry, foreign policy behavior, strategic perception and responses of smaller states is influenced by history, intent and interpretation and could not be measured statistically. All the sources used in the study are secondary sources like those from academic books and peer-reviewed journal articles, policy reports. This design allows the study to link bilateral rivalry and to understand the implications of various aspects of the economy, military, diplomacy and non-traditional security sectors.

### **Regional Security Implication**

The strategic rivalry between China and India has made South Asia a complicated and dangerous place. It generated economic opportunities but it has also made the chances of conflict, fragmentation and instability higher. The region's future depends on finding a balance between competition and cooperation and making institutional frameworks stronger so they can handle new problems. China and India's strategic competition had a significant impact on South Asian security. This rivalry has grown beyond just military conflict to include things like economic power, political alliances and security issues that aren't usually seen as security issues. As both powers aim to expand their presence in the region. South Asia has become a battleground for geopolitical competition. This has made things less stable, less cooperative and less independent for smaller states. In South Asia, regional security has changed from being focused on military issues between states to a wider and more complex framework. Security now includes being able to handle economic shocks, protect the environment and use technology. The rise of China and India's response have speed up this change making competition more complex. The area is moving away from cooperative regionalism and toward competitive geopolitics as a result (Kumar N. , 2026).

### **Military and Strategic Implications**

The most noticeable effect of the competition between China and India is in the military area.

Send troops and more naval ships towards the disputed borders in the Indian Ocean and increasing spending on defense. The 2020 border clashes and other events like them have made people less trusting and made the military get ready for the long term. The Indian Ocean has also become a strategic hotspot with China expanding its maritime presence and India improving its naval strength. This militarization makes it more likely that things will get worse and makes it harder to find a diplomatic solution. The growing rivalry between China and India has had major military and strategic effects on South Asia making it a key battleground for geopolitical competition. This rivalry has grown beyond just politics and trade.

It now includes military posturing, modernization of forces and strategic realignments that have a big effect on the stability of the region. One of the most important effects is the militarization of disputed borders especially along the Line of Actual Control. Both countries have made their troops readier for action by sending more of them to the front lines, moving heavy artillery forward and quickly building new infrastructure. The ongoing military buildup along disputed borders shows a shift toward deterrence-based strategies where both sides try to stop the other side from making advances by improving their combat abilities. But this also makes it more likely that things will get out of hand because people are close together and more aware of what's going on (SIPRI, 2021). ..Another significant influence is how naval competition will grow in the IOR. China's growing presence at sea through port development, naval deployments and anti-piracy missions has given it more strategic control over waters that India has long controlled. India has responded by improving its navy and making stronger ties with other countries at sea.

These alignments are part of a bigger trend of geopolitical polarization where countries are more likely to group together around competing power centers. This makes it harder for countries to stay neutral and makes competition between blocs in the region stronger. Furthermore, the existence of nuclear weapons creates a stability–instability paradox especially in the context of India and Pakistan. Nuclear deterrence prevents a full-scale war, but allows small wars and proxy wars to go on. This paradox makes a fragile stability where

crises can happen often without turning into full-blown war but there is always the chance of making a mistake. The strategic rivalry plays significant role in shaping the security architecture in the region and the crisis management. The lack of strong multilateral security systems in South Asia makes the risks of bilateral tensions even worse. Limited communication, lack of openness and mutual distrust make it harder to resolve conflicts. Also argues that there are more crises in the world because of unresolved conflicts and greater military power. The military and strategic dimensions of the China vs. India "tug of war" in the Indian subcontinent are multifaceted and include the militarization of the borders, competition in the Indian Ocean, rising defense spending, forming alliances and nuclear deterrence.

Even though these changes make each state's security stronger. They all together make the regional order weak and competitive. For long-lasting stability, we need to be able to handle crises well, build trust and create security frameworks that everyone can work together on.

### **Economic and Geo-Economic Implications**

Chinese investments are developmental but they also cause dependency risks. The reaction of India is in order to provide alternative development models. Geo-economic rivalry has turned into a significant instrument of strategic impact, influencing regional orientation. Regional security revolves around economic competition e.g infrastructure investment in China through BRI. The counter-initiatives of India in terms of connectivity and regional trade. India has worked on enhancing cross-border infrastructure, trade facilitation and energy connectivity with the neighboring states like Bangladesh and Nepal. Geo-economic approach of India has focused on the development models based on sustainable and transparent development to balance the state-driven investment policy of China.

The other implication is that smaller states are increasingly becoming economically dependent. Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Maldives are some of the countries where China has made massive investments that have helped improve development in the countries but have also created issues of debt sustainability and financial exposure. The South Asian competition between

China and India is not limited to just the region and has far-reaching geo-economic implications. There is more investment and connectivity projects creating growth and development opportunities, Challenges on dependency, regional fragmentation and strategic competition are specific to each project. States will shape their future economic stability as they navigate these competing influences and work towards inclusive and sustainable development.

### **Political and Diplomatic Implications**

The political and diplomatic effects of China and India strategic competition in South Asia are immense and profoundly affect the balance of power in the region, foreign policies and diplomatic alliances of the smaller states. A significant implication is the escalation of diplomatic competition between China and India as the two nations are aggressively pursuing their goal of expanding their influence by engaging in economic partnerships, infrastructure and strategic alliance with South Asian nations. China has enhanced its regional places by introducing programs such as Belt and Road Initiative whereas India has reacted by enhancing its Neighbourhood First policy and improving bilateral relations with nations like Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Maldives.

This rivalry has led to a polarized diplomatic atmosphere in which smaller countries tend to use a balancing approach so as not to rely on one of the two powers. The second notable implication is the undermining of regional multilateral platforms especially, SAARC. Due to India Pakistan tensions as well as larger strategic mistrust between India and China. The SAARC has been rather inactive, limiting the regional cooperation within the field of trade, connectivity and security. On the other hand, other ensembles such as BIMSTEC are of growing interest as India looks for alliances that exclude Pakistan and reduce the Chinese presence (Rehman, 2024). This change is indicative of the fact that great power rivalry is transforming the institutional structure of South Asia. The political and diplomatic consequences of this rivalry suggest that the current regional order is changing toward a competitive and fragmented diplomatic environment in South Asia.

Both China and India have been making more

high-level visits, bilateral agreements and development partnerships to deepen their influence in the region. The diplomatic outreach of China is directly linked to such measures as the Belt and Road Initiative whereas India has reacted with policies such as the Neighborhood First Policy and Indo-Pacific in general (Pant, 2016). The active foreign policy of India is an attempt to counter the growing influence of China and preserve the traditional influence in South Asia. The competition has also led to a degradation of regional institutions and multilateralism especially South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation.

### **Conclusion**

In a nutshell, China–India strategic competition has significantly transformed the political, economic, and security landscape of South Asia. China's BRI, infrastructure investment, connectivity projects, and strategic partnerships have expanded its regional influence, while India

has responded through its Neighborhood First policy, military modernization, connectivity initiatives, and stronger strategic partnerships. The competition has brought economic opportunities for smaller South Asian nations, but also raised security concerns, geopolitical polarization, economic dependency risks. The outcomes also suggest that these smaller nations such as Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Maldives are not only reactive players but have also started to follow balancing and hedging strategies to protect their interests and strategic independence. The military competition, border dispute, naval rivalry, polarization in diplomacy and the decline in regional bodies such as SAARC, however, have made regional cooperation more difficult. Hence, a stronger dialogue and confidence-building is needed, along with better regional institutions and cooperation between large and small states in order to control competition and mitigate conflict and fragmentation in the region.

### **Conflict of Interest**

The authors showed no conflict of interest.

### **Funding**

The authors did not mention any funding for this research.

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